



How I Escaped

J L de Villiers

How I Escaped

The story of a noteworthy escape
by a Boer out of British India

J. L. DE VILLIERS

Cover Art
Copyright © 2013 E. W. DE VILLIERS

English translation Second Edition
2021 E. W. DE VILLIERS
Released under the
Creative Commons-Attribution-ShareAlike
(CC-BY-SA) license

English translation First Edition
Copyright © 2013 E. W. DE VILLIERS
ISBN-13: 978-1492886167
ISBN-10: 1492886165
All rights reserved.
etienne.wouter.devilliers@gmail.com

FOREWORD

It is with a certain sense of hesitancy that I send this little book into the world. Seeing as I am not an expert in the field of literature and not born to a writing career, it has required a great deal of daring to proceed with the publication of this book.

However my confidence has been strengthened by the success that I have enjoyed in Holland and South Africa with the lectures concerning my unusual escape. Many of my friends and acquaintances have not let me have peace until I promised them that I would let my experiences appear in print. With the help of a friend to whom I am deeply indebted I have adhered to their pressing wish.

With a grateful heart to my confidants who helped me with my escape and with humble apologies for the literary shortcomings, I send this narrative into the world. This is not a tome of warfare but an honest account of what I experienced.

If this book imparts as much pleasure to the reader as my escape caused me anguish and distress, I will be very well pleased.

J.L. DE VILLIERS
Paarl,
December, 1903.

CONTENTS

Foreword	iii
English translation foreword and acknowledgments	v
1 Arrival at the camp	Pg 1
2 The first failed escape attempts	Pg 5
3 New Plans	Pg 9
4 Last preparations	Pg 15
5 Escape	Pg 21
6 On route to the French border	Pg 27
7 Across the border	Pg 35
8 Pondicherry	Pg 41
9 In the hospital	Pg 49
10 On board - Farewell to India	Pg 55
11 Aden – Almost caught	Pg 57
12 Conclusion	Pg 63
13 J.L. de Villiers after the war	Pg 69
14 Historical background and English translation notes	Pg 71

HOW I ESCAPED

ENGLISH TRANSLATION FOREWORD AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is the second edition of this translation and the major difference between this and the first is that it now is distributed under a Creative Commons-Attribution-ShareAlike (CC-BY-SA) license. The time has come to release this book to a wider audience and to make its accessibility much easier. I could not resist re-checking the work for errors (which could still exist through some oversight) and to make some minute alterations which I deemed to be appropriate.

We are now in the period of time (circa 2020 onwards) where manual translation is rapidly becoming superfluous. From humble beginnings at the turn of this century, publicly available automated translation services have slowly gained ground. It has not been easy going as the direct translations of most online services have left much to be desired. But with the advent of computer algorithms utilizing Artificial Neural Networks and other Artificial Intelligence technologies, it is to my mind a certainty that manual translation will become a novelty such as the horse and buggy became in the age of the automobile. So one can already regard this work as an artifact of a bygone age.

There are currently so many sources of information that compete for our attention that it is refreshing to come across a book that the individual can read from cover to cover in a single sitting. Even reading at a leisurely pace will allow the reader to complete this book in a very short period of time. This does not mean that this is not an interesting or engaging story.

On the contrary, as opposed to works of pure fiction, this is the real life adventure of the Boer officer J. L. de Villiers as a prisoner of war and fugitive during the Anglo-Boer war.

I would like to extend posthumous thanks to the author J. L. DE VILLIERS and to the Afrikaans translator S. P. H. DE VILLIERS. By being able to complete the english translation I have had the privilege to share to some small degree in the authors experience.

E. W. DE VILLIERS
2021

HOW I ESCAPED

CHAPTER 1 ARRIVAL AT THE CAMP

On the fourth of June 1901 the transport ship "The City of Cambridge" arrived at the port of Madras with about five hundred prisoners of war and eight officers on board to transit to the prisoner of war camp near Trichinopoly. The author of this story was among the prisoners.

The landing at Madras took place under a blazing sun. A very rudimentary type of boat manned by two Indians with long rowing oars was used to bring the prisoners from the ship to the land. After a prolonged struggle the boats finally landed on the beach through the surf and the rowers carried the passengers one by one to dry land.

Although the landing had been made with a certain degree of proficiency an accident did occur. One of our elderly countrymen inadvertently landed under one of the boats and broke his leg. We had to wait on the beach quite some time until everyone had safely made landfall and was ready to go to the train station. When we arrived at the station just as had happened on the beach, a large crowd had gathered together. As we later learned the most wonderful stories about the Boers were doing the rounds among the Indian population and the rumors were probably the cause of the large crowd of people that had gathered at the station to meet us.

There were two special trains to take us from Madras to Trichinopoly, a distance of approximately two hundred twenty five miles. Everywhere along the route Indians came to the station from far and wide in such large numbers that measures had to be taken to restrict their access until the special trains with the prisoners had passed.

After such a long sea voyage on an overcrowded transport ship with limited space on board and after all the experiences of such a journey which most of us went through for the first time in our lives, it was very pleasant to travel in a train and through a landscape which was entirely foreign to us. Everywhere along the way we saw odd things because the animals as well as the vegetation considerably differs from that of South Africa.

We could not take delight in the natural surroundings and environment for too long though since it soon became dusk. After what we had observed from the monotonous plains and infinite rice fields everywhere along the tracks our hopes for Trichinopoly were not very high.

We arrived early the next morning in Trichinopoly where a large crowd gawked at us and even followed us on our walk from the station to the camp, a distance of approximately four miles. Since we were the first prisoners that arrived there a couple of photographers were present at the station to take portraits. Through the friendly mediation of one of the English officers we later received a few of these pictures. At that time we were in no mood to be photographed because although it was still early in the morning the heat was almost unbearable and we just longed to reach the camp.

After all of our countrymen had eventually departed from the train we continued the journey. It was a sad procession that marched forth. Troops walked in front and on both sides of us while the Indian population streamed in from all sides behind us.

During the sea voyage most of us educated ourselves a little about the country which would be our place of banishment for an undetermined period of time. We cherished the expectation that our camp would be located in a mountainous region overgrown with lush Indian plants, those often beautiful descriptions which one sometimes comes across in books. So great was our disappointment when we arrived at the camp and saw the camp tents pitched on a vast plain precisely at the time of year when a dry warm dusty wind blew ferociously for almost the whole

HOW I ESCAPED

day. In addition water was scarce in that particular region. The people told us that sometimes there were no good rainy years.

Because of these and other objections and also because of the outbreak of cholera the authorities had declared Trichinopoly unfit as a military camp years before. Therefore we were very surprised that this very location was selected for the Boers while there were many more suitable locations in the outstretched Indian empire.

Although it appeared that the health of our countrymen in the camp at Trichinopoly was no worse than camps in other locations in India, the exhausting heat, the lack of water and the unpleasant dust winds made life very unpleasant. In the beginning all the water for drinking, cooking and washing was brought into the camp by water carriers. Later when the number of prisoners increased from five hundred to one thousand, water carts were also used. Since the wells outside the camp did not contain much water and the pump station was constantly out of order there was often a lack of water.

On our arrival the camp was not in good order. The construction of the huts which the Boers later partially helped with, being paid a small compensation, was a welcome change to our very monotonous and yes even boring existence. Most of us were accustomed to the freedom of the veldt and could just not become accustomed to this type of life.

It cannot be denied that no-one had reason to complain. On our arrival in the camp we were quite pleasantly surprised by the fact that beside every bed there was a chest which we discovered contained thin linen garments and other small necessities. To us these thin clothes were very welcome in the tropical climate, seeing as most of us had little or no money and the attire which we were captured in had decayed into a sad state throughout the journey. Those of us who could afford it had the opportunity to have low-cost clothes made.

At the gate the new arrivals entered who were clearly recognizable by their dark clothing. Our countrymen who were already in the camp were standing in a big half mooned circle, looking longingly and curiously as

J L DE VILLIERS

to whether there were friends or relatives among the new arrivals. There was great joy when it became known that Reverend Goddefroy of Pretoria was among us and that the camp would now have a minister.

When we entered the big gate we sang our national anthems. Outside the barbed wire fence one could see the large crowd of Indians that had followed the prisoners from the station and one could also see the huts of the troops and the sentry posts near the gate.

HOW I ESCAPED

CHAPTER 2 THE FIRST FAILED ESCAPE ATTEMPTS

After we had resided in the camp for a few months a couple of our more enterprising countrymen began to devise plans to escape from the prison with all its unpleasantness.

Such an undertaking would without doubt produce many dangers because the camp was equipped with a double wire fence which was crisscrossed between two rows of posts and the ground was filled with prickly pears and thorns. The camp was guarded day and night by a large number of armed sentries who were posted at short intervals. Add to that electric lamps that were mounted on high posts that were placed right around the camp and it made escape at night almost impossible.

Despite this two Boer officers succeeded on the second day of Christmas 1901 to reclaim their freedom, if only for a short while, as will become clear. Near the camp there was a field enclosed with barbed wire that was at the disposal of the prisoners for football, cricket and other games. Due to the construction of huts for more than five hundred prisoners who would arrive later there was insufficient space within the camp for such a field and so the expansion had become necessary.

Early each morning the sentries opened the gate that gave access to the field but at sunset everyone had to be back inside the camp. Nearby there was a small old shed where all the cricket and other sporting equipment was kept in storage.

The prisoners discovered early on that the sentries at the gate took almost no notice of the numbers that went through the camp gate to the field and how many returned in the evening when the gate was locked. So the two Boer officers saw a good chance for escape.

At sunset they remained in the little building to later escape from there under the cover of darkness. They made their plans as adequately as possible in advance. They gathered all the information that they could and borrowed money from some friends who shared their secret.

This last point would always be a problem in any attempt to escape because when we arrived all our money was taken by the authorities for safekeeping and we were only allowed to draw a small amount every week. The payouts were mostly in the form of paper money which was only valid within the camp.

Unfortunately the said field was near the houses of the English camp officers and so the two escapees had no chance of getaway before midnight. By this time the area had only sufficiently quieted down and only then could they crawl through the wire obstructions and make their escape.

Yet it was still a miracle that they were not noticed because the moon had risen in the meantime and had illuminated the whole area. They had made plans to escape on a freight train that departed at ten o'clock each night so that they could be miles removed from the camp by the next morning. Because of the aforementioned delay the plans for the escapees were befuddled and so they could not catch the train.

To increase their calamity they encountered a soldier near the station. He reported the incident immediately upon his return to the camp with the result that Indian lancers were riding around searching to capture them.

The two fugitives had to be very careful because the government of India offered a reward of fifty rupees for any information concerning escaped prisoners and this fact was well known everywhere. The whole day they wandered miles on the outskirts of Trichinopoly and they often saw lancers. They did not wear the ordinary helmets that the prisoners were issued upon their arrival at Madras and therefore the people were not suspicious of the two strangers who were brashly walking everywhere and who presented themselves as tourists.

HOW I ESCAPED

One of them had become quite ill so they could not contemplate crossing over the English-French border on foot. By the evening they had obtained a ticket at the first station after Trichinopoly but unfortunately all the passengers at this station had to transfer to another train and therefore

the passengers had to wait at the station for a while. The two tried to remain unnoticed in the dusk and shadow of the station building but it seemed clear that the rumor of their escape had spread to this area as well.

Although there were alert passengers the two fugitives were only noticed and recognized at the last possible moment and thus the alluring dream of their freedom was at an end. Their only opportunity had been this brazen and bold act but circumstances had stacked against them and so the first attempt to escape was a failure.

A long time afterwards it was still a mystery to the authorities how the two men managed to escape from the camp despite all their precautions and strict surveillance. For a month the two men were confined to a tent and guarded by a special guard section while sentries searched everywhere along the wire fences for the spot where they could have crawled through.

We let the English hunt and it was entertainment for us to see everything they did to solve the riddle. To ensure that such a thing would not happen again they erected more barbed wire fences until they were satisfied that no one would be able to escape again.

The first escape attempt did not deter other prisoners. On the contrary there were a few young Freestaters¹ promptly ready with another effort.

¹ Freestaters were citizens of the Republic of the Free State which today is a province in the Republic of South Africa.

J L DE VILLIERS

However I will not describe this escape in detail as it is also resulted in failure. After some days at large near the French border of Karikal, about a hundred miles from the camp, the Indians caught them and returned them to Trichinopoly.

They suffered many hardships because they had to drudge day and night, mostly at night, through rice fields that were covered in water. But the consequences of this failed attempt would become even more unpleasant for them because the camp officers decided to sentence them to fifty-six days hard labor with the specific purpose of being a disheartening example to others.

HOW I ESCAPED

CHAPTER 3 NEW PLANS

This is how matters stood in February 1902: Although we knew that the English Parliament would meet soon and that there might be a change in the state of affairs in South Africa, we did not hold out much hope for a speedy peace.

Some time before I had written to my brother in South Africa to send me the necessary money so that I could, if the need arose, return at my own expense to South Africa immediately after the conclusion of peace. I wanted to get away from Trichinopoly at any price and as soon as possible. But instead of the long-awaited peace, the war still continued and I contemplated with anxiety the approaching summer heat, dust storms, and other unpleasantness that I had experienced the previous year.

Not at all discouraged by the failures of the others, I seriously started to think about my intentions to execute an escape. I was willing to risk anything instead of spending another summer in the camp. There was admittedly many difficulties that I had to get out of the way, but the last escape for which our countrymen were punished so severely just made my desire to give the authorities a good pranking stronger. This time escape would not result in failure!

From the very beginning I decided to make the attempt without a partner and the experiences of the former escapees strengthened my resolve. I also had to make sure that everything could be carried out in a single night between roll call in the evening and then again the next morning. But how would I outwit everyone to get out of the camp undetected?

As I have explained it was completely impossible to crawl through the barbed wire. During the next few days more sentries were on duty and they were on guard about fifty yards apart. Right around the camp there

was a high embankment on which the guards walked to and fro and from where they could see everything easily. There was therefore no chance to escape along these lines. I would have to think of something else.

Various plans, one less feasible than the next came to mind only to be rejected. One afternoon I was walking around within the camp and reflected on the matter when my eyes fell upon the Indian shops small oxcart near our cabin. The small cart was pulled by one ox - something often seen in India and behind the cart there walked some Indians who worked in the store during the day and served my fellow prisoners with small goods.

As soon as the cart got to the gate, the gate was opened and the cart with the Indians exited the gate and it was then locked immediately. When I saw this the idea instantly came to mind that here I might have a good chance. If I could disguise myself as an Indian perhaps I could walk out with them behind the cart at the gate and escape from the camp in this way.

Firstly it was necessary to find out whether the cart and the Indians were frisked at the gate, whether they had to display a pass on their departure and whether the cart had to wait until the other Indians who worked at the shop arrived at the gate. Furthermore I had to make sure whether the Indians left the camp each evening with the cart after the store was closed, or left later.

Several evenings when it was time for the cart to leave, I was in the vicinity of the gate to note what the guards at the gate did when the cart was allowed to go through. This usually happened at sunset while we were having our dinner. The cart then went past our hut and the Indians would take a shorter route between the huts to the gate.

As soon as I saw the cart pass by I stood up from the table and left for my place at the gate. None of my friends knew anything of my plans yet. In this way I carefully scouted everything that transpired at the gate for a considerable time. As soon as the cart arrived at the gate, the guards

HOW I ESCAPED

opened the gate even if the store Indians were not there; and when the cart had exited, the big gate was closed again. Over the next few minutes the other Indians who were still closing the store arrived and were then let out through the small gate. However on some evenings the store Indians walked out of the great gate behind the cart. They were never asked for a pass and they were never searched.

After all that I had observed I was of the opinion that my plan was feasible. If I could disguise myself as an Indian and I could present myself as one of the Indians who worked in the store and I would be able to exit the gate behind the cart.

After I had carefully considered this plan and had come to the conclusion that it would probably be my only chance to escape from the camp, I announced my plans to my friend, the gentlemen H. M. When I had told him of it and had laid out how I wanted to execute my attempt he was very well pleased. We discussed the plan thoroughly and it seemed that I had thought of every obstacle that my friend could offer me and that I was ready with a solution to each problem.

The most important thing was to assemble the necessary clothes for my intended disguise. The first article I got my hands on was a turban, a thin white cloth that is wrapped around the head. Our servant who the commandant allowed us to hire at our own expense of course, came to our room every morning - if one could call the small space between the low reed partition a room.

The illustration on page 13 provides an accurate picture of our lodgings.

The rooms which were without doors, as is usually the case in India, were equipped or intended for two people. The furniture was very basic and consisted of one table, two chairs, two kists and two beds each which were covered with a grass mat and a hard pillow. Because of the unbearable heat it was obviously impossible to sleep on a mattress.

Our servant neatened the small room every morning. While he was

busy doing that I had an excellent opportunity to talk to him without generating suspicion. One morning I told him that I would find it better if there were sheets on the beds but that it had to be of a thin material. I then pointed to his head and said: "Bring me such a long piece". A turban is made from a long piece of thin cloth which is wrapped around the head several times in a very artful way.

Now I had to make these detours to achieve my goal without generating suspicion. So I gave our servant the necessary money, one rupee, and the next morning received the material that was so indispensable for a turban. The Indian had not harbored the least suspicion and it was just as well because the Indian government offered a reward of fifty rupees, slightly more than three pounds, for information regarding the escape of prisoners or for the extradition of such a fugitive to the authorities. With all the preparations for my departure I therefore had to work in such a manner that the Indians in the camp as well as those in our immediate vicinity would not suspect a single thing.

I tore a length of approximately three feet from the piece of cloth and girded it around my waist and the rest - although it was a bit short - was long enough for the turban. I then tried to make a turban because many a time I had glimpsed how it was done but after many futile attempts I had to enlist the help of the one friend who shared my secret. He felt that the matter was a very simple one but he also had to give up in the end. Then I made the plan to call in the servant and have him do it for us.

I would tell him that we needed the turban for a theatrical performance. Everyone and therefore our servants knew that we had various societies in the camp. Recently a play: "The breaking of a wedding vow", was staged by the members of the societies and of course all the players were in costume.

Thus when we imparted our request to the Indian servant he did not become suspicious. He carefully showed us how a turban was twisted. After the servant had left I quickly took a needle and thread and sewed

HOW I ESCAPED

the turban together because I was not sure whether I would be able to twist it again as it would fall apart. The first step on the road to my salvation was therefore taken.

Furthermore I also had to try to get my hands on a long white coat just like the ones the Indians wear in Trichinopoly and probably in most parts of India. The question was how to get it because everything that was brought into the camp was investigated at the gate. But I found a way.

One morning at breakfast the Indian who served our table wore a very dirty jacket. I said: "Look here fellow, if you serve us at our table you have to make sure that you are clean."

He answered as I expected that he had no other jacket and no money to buy other clothes. It did not surprise me because the wages they received amounted to no more than five to ten shillings per month and out of that they had to support their whole family and sometimes their grandfather or grandmother.

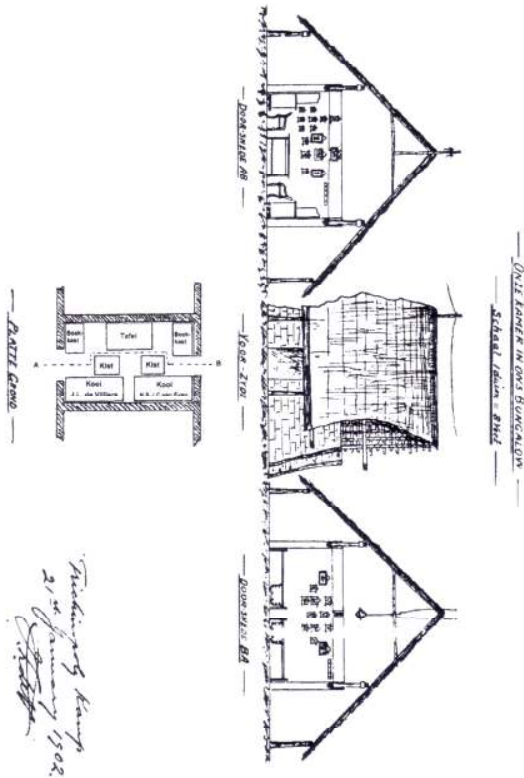
So I provided him with an answer and tasked him to order two jackets just like the one he had on.

"If you come here in the morning with your old dirty jacket, put on one of the clean ones and if the clean one becomes dirty, have it washed. I'll hold on to the other one for safekeeping."

The next morning he brought the requested clothing for the money that I had given him the previous evening when he left for home.

The most important thing now was to find a good way to blacken me. I did several tests until I resorted to a printing ink of which I had obtained a small bottle. The ink was admittedly a bit too black and thick but I solved the problem by mixing the ink with paraffin. It still was not right. After I tried it on my hands it seemed that my pores were still too visible and white. After deliberations and further trials I came to the conclusion that blackened burnt cork could also be used.

There were still many other matters I had to investigate before I could dare to make my attempt because I was determined to not to try it until I had taken all the necessary steps.



CHAPTER 4

LAST PREPARATIONS

Shortly after our arrival in the camp we had some freedom of movement under a so called parole. Some of us made use of this small freedom to visit the neighboring village. Except for this visit we were in the dark regarding the habits and customs of the Indians.

As mentioned already we arrived at the camp with a special train and so we had no opportunity to find out what class the Indians usually used when they traveled. And yet this was a matter of great importance because if I took a second class ticket at the station, where the entire staff were Indians, I would in the case that such a thing was not granted to Indians, be obliged to get entangled in a conversation with them. In this way I would run the risk that all my plans would be betrayed.

So one morning I went to the small building where the cook was preparing rice with curry and other Indian dishes for us. Since I wanted to strike up a conversation with him to gather information unnoticed, I firstly told him that we were very happy with his cooking and then I asked him if he didn't want come with us to South Africa after the war. It seemed that he was eager to come with. I told him that the war had left me very impoverished and that I would have to convey him in the cheapest possible way. I therefore asked him a number of questions: From which place would he take the boat, Madras or Bombay? His answer was that the trip to Madras was shorter and therefore it would be cheaper.

"But for which class on the train would I have to pay for you?" I asked.

"Third Class sir," he replied.

"But don't you ever travel in second class?"

"No, just the servants of people traveling in first class but the ordinary coolies all travel in third class."

In this way I gathered up information.

My next task was to obtain a rail timetable, not only to find out how much a ticket would cost but to also see what the most suitable train to depart from Trichinopoly would be. However it would be too risky to try and get my hands on a timetable and so I was obliged to solicit the help of one of my friends. He actually managed to smuggle a rail timetable into the camp by the bribing a sweeper. It was as I have already said very risky because the Indians in the camp were not trustworthy. Luckily this Indian had already smuggled other things in for us and it probably provisionally paid him better than to betray us. The timetable booklet cost us six Annas (8d), more than the Indian would normally receive for two days wages.

The booklet was a great help to me because I could now research everything about my proposed trip. I found that the train left for Trichinopoly about four miles from our camp, nine minutes after one o'clock at night. This train would suit me the best if I could leave the camp before sunset. It was the postal train and it would arrive sixteen minutes past three at Villupuram, the station from where I would probably have to continue my flight on foot. The price of a third-class ticket would just be two rupees (2 shillings and 8 pence).

I also noticed that a branch line ran from Villupuram station to Pondicherry on French territory where I wanted to escape to. The first train from Villupuram only left at twelve o'clock and so it would not be advisable to wait for this train. Thus once the train arrived at Villupuram it would be best for me to immediately continue on foot in the direction of Pondicherry. It was essential to be across the border in French territory before sunrise or at the latest before the following roll call in the camp.

Since it was necessary to avoid any word exchange while buying the ticket at the Trichinopoly station I had to be very familiar with the correct pronunciation of the name of the station where I wanted to go. The stations in India, for us at least, have coarse names not to mention the way the Indians utter or rather force out the names.

Villupuram was no exception. It was therefore necessary to strike up a conversation with the Indian in the camp. I got hold of the same sweeper who had previously provided me with services.

HOW I ESCAPED

I had a talk with him about the beautiful temples in his country and I made the remark that according to what I had heard there were more beautiful temples elsewhere in Trichinopoly.

I told him that I had seen some of the temples but that I could not remember the names of the places.

"I think that one of the places was situated eastward", I said and pointed in the direction. "Its such a funny name; I think the name starts with Vill, Villi, Villu or something."

"Oh", he replied, "Villupuram."

"Yes, that's the name. Repeat it again."

"Villupuram, Villupuram!"

I carefully noted how he pronounced the name and where he placed the accent so that I would not have trouble with it later, nor would raise suspicion.

In this way I obtained all the information I needed for my escape - such as the exact location of Pondicherry and the distance from Villupuram to the French border. My knowledge of Pondicherry I largely obtained from a book, a kind of travel guide for India which we had obtained on board the ship. Fortunately there was a map in the book in which the boundary between the English and French border was indicated - namely a small river, the Jingee about eighteen miles from the Villupuram station.

It was a very long distance for me because I had noticed that most Indians walked barefoot although some sometimes wore sandals without socks. I would not dare to walk the entire distance barefoot and decided to add a pair of cricket shoes to my outfit.

Three weeks went by before I had my plans worked out in detail and I now seriously started thinking about the day I would dare to make my escape. I should add here that I had the luck of having received a letter with the currency of fifty pounds from my brother in South Africa a few days before. The censor had opened the letter but for some inexplicable reason had sent the currency with the letter to the camp.

He probably reckoned that I would sign and return the currency so that the money would be placed on credit with the camp commandant who kept our money for safekeeping; or maybe he reasoned that the money would be deposited into my account at the Bank of Madras where everyone of my fellow countrymen who had the means had opened an account.

This last method also had a twofold purpose. In this way we thought that we would be able to make payments that the camp commandant did not always have to be involved in. We had already done this several times when the commandant suddenly issued an order that no currency of prisoners of war would be paid out unless he co-signed it. It therefore goes without saying that I kept the aforementioned currency that I now had in my possession very quiet because if my attempt succeeded the money would come in very handy later.

We had made a plan before the time not to have me depart the camp penniless. The authorities allowed us to withdraw a small amount of our deposited money each week of not more than one pound for our personal use. In the beginning we just received paper money. This money only had value within the camp and we could not do anything with it outside the camp. After we repeatedly insisted on hard currency, we partially received paper money and partially cash moneys, although the last was only paid out in two Anna and four Anna pieces.

We almost never saw a rupee but if we got our hands on one we carefully hid it, even the half rupees, to be of service to those who may have need of some of it in an attempt to escape. Twice we had already amassed a cash amount of eighty to ninety rupees, mostly in small coins, and it was also not a lot of effort to get my paper money exchanged for hard currency.

This was because my roommate was the secretary of almost all the societies that had been established in the camp, and since the monthly subscription of each member was two to four Annas, there was usually a lot of hard currency in the treasury cupboard.

Also some time before we had held a sporting event to commemorate

HOW I ESCAPED

the independence of the Orange Free State. The event was a huge success and it brought in a lot of money for the sports committee. The prizes were paid out in paper money as far as was possible and since I eagerly wanted to take my money-belt with me, I stuffed it as full as possible with silver money – to the amount of about five pounds. It was necessary to allow some of my other friends into the secret and through exchanges they managed to get their hands on all the hard currency that was in the camp.

CHAPTER 5

ESCAPE

On 10 March 1902 I was ready to put my plans to the test. In the afternoon I went to gentleman H. M. and since I would not have time in the evening after the roll call, I covered my whole body in black except for my hands and face. Additionally I dressed in all the clothes that I would need that evening and over that I put on my regular clothing that I usually wore in the camp. I finished everything in the room of gentleman M so that I could complete my disguise later that afternoon. I laid out my razor, shaving brush and fifteen to twenty blackened corks so that I could complete my disguise immediately after signing the attendance register. The sergeant would only come around with the attendance register at six o' clock. Before that time I had to quickly eat and wait until the store cart had left.

So I still had a lot of time. I talked with my friends and joked as if nothing was going to happen. I arranged with two of them that they would go and eat somewhat earlier than usual on this particular evening. As soon as they were finished they had to keep watch near the room of gentleman M to get hold of the sergeant who usually came to our hut so that the attendance could immediately be signed. After they had signed the book they would all go to my room where everything was ready and where they would wait for me to further assist me with my disguise.

After my friends had finished I ate in the camp for the last time. I was there alone and was just busy with desert when the sergeant came in with his book. I signed the book for the last time and made some small talk but when he went out the front door I jumped out the back door and went straight to the room where my friends M and W were waiting for me.

The usual roll call for the entire camp only took place at six o' clock and after they counted all the inmates the sergeant usually went to the officers hut. Thus the cart would be through the gate before the sergeant gave me a chance to sign the attendance. We foresaw this difficulty and one of us, the gentleman v. T. had asked the sergeant a few days before to come to our hut first and to read out the names of the other inmates afterwards. The reason for this request was that we didn't want wait for the roll call to be over but wanted to go to the hall on the other side of the camp immediately after the meal.

Every night something was almost always happening at the hall, either a meeting of the debating society, exercises of the gymnastic society or something or other. The sergeant was accommodating enough in this regard and luckily on the afternoon of the tenth of March he arrived at our hut before he went to the huts of our fellow countrymen. By doing this he had made a large part of my escape possible because the following roll call would only take place at six o' clock the following morning and the authorities would therefore not discover my absence before that time.

When I entered the room my friend M quickly shaved my long pointy beard and cut my black mustache short in the same style that the Indians usually wore. In the meantime gentlemen W smeared my hands, arms and face black. The work went quickly but when I looked in the mirror it seemed that my lips were too red and my eyes too white.

Luckily I still had the bottle of writing ink. I wet my fingers with the ink and pulled it through my lips and eyes. For a moment it caused a little pain but it immediately brought about a big change in my outward appearance. My lips now had a blue-like color and the whites of my eyes were not as prominent.

Not far from our hut was the shop which I already mentioned. On this particular afternoon, to prevent the Indians from closing the store at the same time as the cart went from the shop to the gate, the gentleman M gave a few rupees change to some of our most trusted young countrymen without sharing any further information with them.

HOW I ESCAPED

He just instructed them to buy something in the store when the cart left and to keep the Indians occupied for as long as possible. They did this as agreed and I had just finished when the report came that the cart had passed by on the way to the gate. It was about half past six.

I had completely changed appearance within a quarter of an hour.

The most significant moment now lay ahead. I greeted the few friends who shared the secret and when I greeted magistrate M he looked at me as if to say: “de Villiers perhaps you should rather not risk it.”

However I was determined to risk the escape come what may. I went out of the room onto the stoep which ran right round the huts and saw a few people sitting there while others were sitting in front of their huts playing “platriing”². It was therefore a little difficult for me to walk past them as an Indian. The gentleman M went out to our fellow prisoners and told them that the order had been sounded for the roll call and that the sergeant was already waiting for them. They all left and so I slipped out.

It was high time because the cart had already gone quite a distance and had to be close to the gate. The cart had to take a detour around the huts while I took a shortcut in between the huts. All the prisoners stood in long rows in front of their huts and when I passed in front of one of them where the sergeant was reading off the names I heard one of the men say: “Look there, now that’s a dark coolie.”

Although the people’s attention were trained on me in this way, no one recognized me. It reassured me because I was almost certain that the English would take for me an Indian. When I passed the last hut and was near the gate, I came across the sentry. He also thought that it was an Indian who was walking past and so he took no notice of me. As I later learned the whole plan would have failed if it was not for the ingenuity of one of my friends.

² Literal meaning: flat ring - From the game Quoits (koits, kwoits, kwaitis) that is a traditional game which involves the throwing of metal (sometimes horseshoes), rope or rubber rings over a set distance usually to land over or near a spike (sometimes called a hob, mott or pin).

The postal sentry usually came to our hut first and then directly to the room of gentleman M which was the same room in which my transfiguration had taken place. While the other prisoners who were let in on the secret stood watching the gate to see if I would get through, the gentleman v. T. stayed at the hut. He was just in time to distract the sentry who wanted to go into the room to deliver letters and to have a chat.

If the sentry had entered the room he would have discovered everything such as the black burnt corks and newly cut beard trimmings which would have immediately generated suspicion. The gentleman v. T. hurried to meet the sentry and asked him if he could speak to him alone for a moment. He walked with him to one of the other rooms and to keep him busy for as long as possible, produced glasses and the largest square bottle. It was the best way to keep the sentry there.

The gentleman v. T. did his utmost to keep the conversation lively and frequently filled the glass of the sentry. Now and then the gentleman v. T. popped outside and back in and fortunately met someone who notified gentleman M of the jeopardy.

So all traces of the disguise soon vanished. If the sentry had entered a few minutes earlier he would have probably caught us in the room red-handed. However things had gone well so far. The cart was almost at the gate and I had to jog a little to meet it there.

The cart was outfitted with a hood that was open at the front and at the back. The cart was pulled by an ox but the Indian driver continued to sit on the cart and steered the ox with a pair of reins which had been pulled through the nose of the ox.

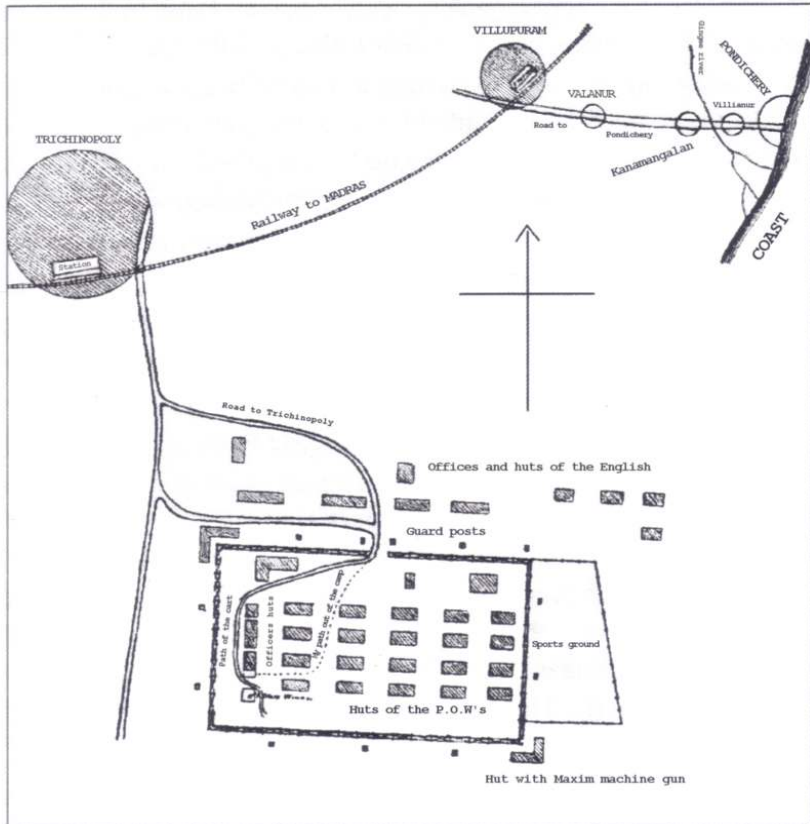
When I got to the cart I had to make sure the Indian would not see me. So I stood behind the cart when it stopped at the gate. The guard at the gate was standing in a small cubicle, a kind of a guardhouse, and when the guard who was on duty saw the cart he took his keys to the gate, removed the chain and opened the gate wide to let the cart go through.

HOW I ESCAPED

The gate opened to the inside. The guard therefore passed the ox with the gate and stood across from me. This did not last long. When the gate was open the cart went ahead and I grabbed the hood of the cart as if I was supposed to be with the cart. The Indian at the front was too busy with his ox to notice what was happening at the back.

So in this way I walked through the big gate with the cart. The cart turned left behind guard houses while I went along the big road in between the huts of the British troops on the main road to Trichinopoly.

Schematic diagram of the escape



CHAPTER 6 ON ROUTE TO THE FRENCH BORDER

When I had left the gate I was as cool as a cucumber but a sense of dread came over me when I was a few yards away from the camp. It seemed to me as if the guards were following me to shoot me. However I felt that they could rather have shot me but that I would not look back.

After I had progressed a ways past the English huts I produced a pair of blue spectacles. I also changed my way of walking to give the impression that I was limping. I did this in case the sentry's at the gate had become suspicious as the Indians of the store went through the gate later as well. If they realized that the first Indian who walked out with the cart was a disguised Boer they would have pursued me immediately. But they would take no notice of me if they saw me with my altered gait as an old man with a blue glasses. I could not be too careful.

I walked calmly, at ease. Since the station was a good hour's walk from the camp I had to walk a little faster to catch the train on time. The only thing bothering me was the sand in my shoes. I was also extremely thirsty. I walked to the railway bridge and from there walked along the tracks to the station, a distance of about two hundred yards.

Since the station was on the opposite side of the tracks and not on the side of the camp, I had to cross the platform to buy a ticket. An Indian conductor stood at the door where I had to go through to get to the back of the building. As I walked through he spoke to me in English: "Sir, your ticket please."

However I took no notice of him and kept on walking. I was under the impression that because he had addressed me as “sir” he could see that I was not one of his countrymen. I walked to the back of the building to find out where I could buy a third class ticket. After I had wandered around a bit I observed its location around the corner of the building.

Luckily it was a bit dark there and I was the only one who wanted to buy a ticket at that particular moment. I had two rupees in my hand. When I stepped up to the ticket office I put my hand through the opening as far as I could and spoke as clearly as I could: “Villupuram”, while putting the money down fairly hard. The Indian who sold the tickets counted the money and gave me a ticket. Very casually I put it in my pocket and walked back to the platform where I kept myself amidst the other Indians.

The postal train arrived at eight. Just as soon as the train had stopped I went to the first third-class carriage and boarded it. I had not been sitting there for very long when one of the Indian conductors came to the carriage and said something in his vernacular. I did not understand any of it but since all the Indians who were with me in the same compartment were getting out I followed suit. We walked behind the conductor until we reached the back of the train where we once again boarded a third-class carriage. I made sure to sit in one of the corners close to the door that opened to the platform.

A few minutes later the conductor came around to inspect our tickets. He was carrying a lamp in his hand and swung it back and forth to see if everyone had a ticket. When he had left I began to devise a plan to quench my unbearable thirst. Since I could not speak the language I could not ask for water.

Fortunately an Indian walked past with a tray full of tangerines. I threw a few pieces of loose change on his tray and took two tangerines. I knew that I had paid too much but I was afraid that he would start talking to me and then I would have to answer him - something I wanted to avoid at all cost.

HOW I ESCAPED

The train departed at nine minutes past eight. When the train was a short distance from the station I took a look at the camp that I had left. I saw that the lights were burning and I became sad at the thought that all of my friends did not know how long they would still be there while I was going to be free soon.

But the sad thoughts soon evaporated with the realization that I was still far from being free. Everything had gone well thus far, far beyond my expectations; but it was only the beginning. It would still take quite some time before I would be able to enjoy my freedom again and I had to constantly be on my guard not to spoil everything at the last moment.

Luckily it was a fast train and we traveled without much delay. By midnight we were already halfway between Trichinopoly and Villupuram. The Indians in my compartment often looked at me but the light was not very bright. I do believe that none of them had any suspicion of my disguise.

One of them could not take his eyes off of me though. It bothered me a little but I pretended that I was asleep and was quietly dozing in my corner. It was only in appearance though because I was very much awake.

Shortly after midnight this particular Indian nudged me and said: "Sir, sir." I was under the impression that he wanted to talk to me and to deceive him I pointed to my mouth and ears to make him understand that I was deaf and dumb. He most probably understood me, for although he still stared at me he did not speak to me any further. I kept to my corner and pretended that I was in a deep sleep.

I checked my watch to see if it was three o'clock yet. I was afraid that I would perhaps miss the station. When the train stopped now and then I listened intently while the name of the station was being called. The names that were called never sounded like "Vilpram", as the name Villupuram is most commonly pronounced.

A few minutes past three o'clock the train arrived at Villupuram. When the train stopped I immediately exited. I saw the name of the station on the signboard. I had to find out where to present my ticket but since

there were not many passengers getting off I could not follow any examples. However I saw an Indian sitting at the gate and when I walked past him I gave him my ticket.

I was on the west side of the station. According to my calculations Pondicherry had to lie to the east of the Villupuram station. So I searched behind the station for a road that I could follow and that would take me in the right direction. The first road that I encounter led northwards. I continued in the expectation that I would later find an intersection where the road crossed the railway. Though I had walked a long distance I did not come across such a road intersection with the tracks.

So I went back past the station and I was lucky enough to find a road on the other side of the station a few hundred yards away which in my opinion was going in the direction of Pondicherry.

The road was more or less straight and had trees planted on either side. Here and there the road crossed plains that stretched out for long distances. Occasionally I tried to look at the stars, but the sky was so cloudy that I couldn't see any. I thus had to have a lot of faith that the road was going in the right direction and to continue walking.

I walked with difficulty because the sand constantly got into my sandals³. Since I was not wearing socks it made the walking more unpleasant. I also suffered from thirst and it would still probably be a long time before I would get a drink of water again.

A little while later I came across a pond but it was more mud than water. Nevertheless I could do nothing but drink. After that I kept to the same route. I eagerly looked forward to the dawn because after daybreak I would be able to determine for a certainty whether I was on the right track.

To my joy when the night sky had become less cloudy I spotted the

³ Earlier the author mentioned that he was using cricket shoes. From the photograph at the back of this book which was taken to show the author disguised it can be seen that the shoes were cut in an open toe fashion and therefore gives the appearance of sandals.

HOW I ESCAPED

constellation of the “Great Bear” on my left hand side. So I was sure that I was going in the right direction.

At five o' clock in the morning I walked through the small town Valanur. I was afraid that here I might be ensnared by difficulties. Maybe the authorities had already telegraphed ahead. However there was no other way than to quietly continue. If I had tried to circumvent the village I might have raised suspicion and also might have lost my way.

The path curved through the village. It was silent. I did not encounter anyone when I walked through the village and on the other side of the village I followed the large road in the same direction again. Shortly thereafter at six o' clock, daylight broke. I was now completely certain that I was on the right road and I rested a little until the sun appeared to be entirely above the horizon.

I was very tired and would have liked to have rested longer but after I had been sitting for a few minutes it occurred to me that it would be better to persevere until I had reached my goal.

The experiences of the other escape attempts had taught me not to become reckless at the very end. There was no time to lose. At six o' clock there would be roll call in the camp and by then my absence would undoubtedly be discovered. By seven o' clock the authorities would telegraph all the surrounding areas so it would be virtually impossible for me to cross the border to reach Pondicherry. There could be no question of rest.

The cloth around my middle hindered me as I walked and so I removed it. I wrapped it around my head and face so that only my eyes and nose stuck out. I then marched forth encouraged again.

I really suffered with thirst. I was therefore just too grateful when after a bend in the road I saw an Indian woman with a pitcher on her head. She most probably filled the pitcher from a well in the vicinity. There was a number of women at the well. They looked up surprised and could not recognize who was coming their way. All except one immediately fled. I went up to the woman, took the pot out of her hand and drank long and deep. But I could not tarry long because I knew that the Indian

girls that had fled would be narrating everything about the stranger at the well.

At eight o' clock I arrived at another village. I had now been walking continuously for about five hours and I expected that I was not far from the border. The name of the village would probably be Manamagalan as I had identified it on the map and it was a customs outpost for everything that was imported from the French territory. So I was still on British soil.

Before I went through the village I carefully paid attention whether anyone was on my trail. I slowly continued until I reached a gate where I had to go through. Since nobody was there guarding it and the gate stood half open, I slipped through unnoticed.

Not far from the gate stood a few nice houses, probably for the customs officials. One of them was calmly reading a newspaper on the porch. I was very curious to know whether there was any news in the newspaper about one of the Boers who had escaped from the camp. All was quiet and I continued unfettered.

According to my calculations I could not have been far from the border so I was constantly looking out for a small river named the Gingee which on the map had been indicated as the French territorial border. The road was densely overgrown with trees and shrubs and according to the nature of the environment it did not seem unlikely that there would be a river nearby.

I was a little disappointed when I had not gotten to the river after twenty minutes. I was becoming afraid that I might have strayed from the correct path when in the distance I saw a high iron bridge. I now gained renewed strength because I was sure that the river could not be very far off.

After I had walked another twenty minutes I came to a small river. There was no bridge there. I had to go through the water and risk that part of my disguise, namely my darkened legs, would wash off.

Since I was under the impression that the small river was the border, I

HOW I ESCAPED

looked around carefully. A few Indians were busy washing clothes in the river but neither they nor the few other Indians who were wandering on the river bank gave the impression that they were waiting to catch an escaped Boer.

So I casually walked through the water to get onto French territory as quickly as possible. The water was about knee deep and where the water was clean and clear I quenched my thirst thoroughly before I proceeded.

CHAPTER 7 ACROSS THE BORDER

Now I could walk as a free man on French territory. I had brought the Four color and Orange Colors with me. Through our servants we had smuggled rolls of ribbon into the camp and many of us wore the colors at the celebration of the Free States Independence day as well as on sporting occasions. The last sports day had to be postponed until the third of March which was due to unforeseen circumstances and because the Governor of Madras was visiting. This was exactly one week before the day I escaped.

I pinned the colors to my chest because the greatest danger was now behind me. Nobody would be surprised to hear that having obtained the assurance of freedom outside English territory that it made me so spirited that I could not neglect in singing both the Transvaal and Free State anthems. I also sang some Psalms to express my gratitude for the success that I had achieved in my endeavor thus far.

I followed the road and met an Indian not far from the border. I asked him in English if I could get a cart to Pondicherry. He did not understand me nor I him. I showed him my feet and through gestures tried to make him understand that I could not walk much farther and badly needed a lift. He was too dim to understand. So I continued onwards all the while singing.

Every now and then I encountered Indians and although they looked very surprised, they allowed me to continue unhindered.

After a quarter of an hour I came to a small town named Villeanur. I spoke to each Indian I met and asked them where the station was because I wanted travel by rail as I was still three miles from Pondicherry. It seemed that they also did not understand me. I tried all possible ways to pronounce the word "station": "stasjon", "steeshun", but it was all in vain. Nothing helped.

Eventually I met someone who presumably understood me and they led me to a police station. Although the French flag was flying there, to avoid all difficulties, I did not have any desire to make my acquaintance with the police. But then after I had thought about the matter I decided to risk the step because I could not walk anymore and in all likelihood I would meet a European that would be able to assist me further.

You can understand my disappointment when upon my arrival I only encountered Indians and they spoke a language that I could not understand. When I tried to clarify that I desperately needed something to drink it appeared that one of them understood a little English. He saw that I was not an Indian and found out soon enough that I was a Boer.

When he saw the colours on my chest and heard me speak about Trichinopoly he immediately understood the matter and from then onwards I heard nothing but "Boer Boer Boer". Soon there was a crowd of people surrounding me. I did not want to sojourn there though and therefore renewed my efforts to procure a cart to transport me to Pondicherry.

To my great joy a young boy finally arrived with a small ox and cart. You should not think that I'm exaggerating when I say that everything is small there; but anyone that has been to India knows how small and miniature everything is - both man and beast. And yet it is surprising to see how much work the small oxen can perform. They run miles with small carts without letting up and it is a well known fact that no horse can keep up with these small oxen in the long run.

The Indian was willing to take me to Pondicherry for ten Annas, i.e. about one shilling. We left for Villeanur at about eleven o'clock in the

HOW I ESCAPED

morning. Because I was very tired and since there were no benches or seats I lay down in the back of the cart.

The ox was lazy and the journey lasted way too long for my taste. What amused me particularly though was that all along the way the driver told everyone that he met who he had on his cart. And while he goaded his ox I heard the Indians chant “Boer, Boer, Boer” in passing.

Everyone came for a look into the cart and it was sometimes difficult for me to keep a straight face. The driver had become very important because for the first and undoubtedly last time in his life he was carrying a Boer in his cart.

In this manner we proceeded until we arrived in Pondicherry at half past twelve in the afternoon, this was after an hour and a half of travel. When I was still in the camp at Trichinopoly I understood from the travel guide that there was as in most other places, a travel bureau. However the Indian on the little cart could not find the place. So when I saw a pushcart I sent the little cart back and hired this new means of transport. The pushcart was propelled from behind by an Indian while the passenger held the steering in their hands themselves.

The Indian luckily understood English and could make sense of where I wanted to go. When I got out of the little oxcart the driver quickly announced to the Indians in the vicinity who he had transported in his cart. Everyone was very well pleased with the idea of having beheld an authentic Boer. Or at least that was how it seemed to me if I judged by the crowd which surrounded me.

At the travel bureau the Indian owner soon appeared. I firstly asked him to indicate to me where I could find a place where I could rest and then to have food prepared for me. He wanted a few rupees to buy food and told me that he could not offer me a place to sleep. He explained that there was a travelers hut but only for travelers who brought their own bedding and that all the beds were without pillows and mattresses.

I gave him a rupee and asked him to make me a little tea and to show me to a bathroom. In the bathroom there were only a few large pots with water. So I could wash myself but I could not take a bath. I called

the Indian of the pushcart. I paid him four Annas for the ride to Pondicherry but he was not satisfied. He wanted more. Since he could understand English I asked him to stay with me to serve as my interpreter and to also help me clean myself.

After I had gotten soap and a brush I made my first attempt to wash off the mix of printing ink, black burnt cork and other filth. The result of the first attempt was very unsatisfactory. Here and there the black had come off easily but then my skin had a wonderful coloration with all kinds of blotches as if I was suffering from some terrible disease.

As is easily understood a lot of black was given off by my legs and face and my original white clothes were smeared with black everywhere. Since I had no other clothing I had to put the same clothing back on again. So I looked very comical when, after I had taken a bath and had drunk my tea, I took to the streets to buy other apparel.

I asked the Indian to take me to a European shop where I could buy decent clothing. We drove in the pushcart again and when I saw one of the streets had been named "Esplanade" I steered in that direction because I thought that European stores would be there. The Indian assured me that there were no shops so close to the sea and pointed in the direction where I would find the shops.

I got off the cart but could not see any shops except for Indian ones. I asked the Indian with the pushcart in vain to take me to a European store but it seemed that every business in Pondicherry belonged to Indians.

When I entered one of the stores and asked the owner to give me a ready-made suit he replied that he did not have any in stock but that he would have a suit made for me. The wages are so low in India that in a little place like Pondicherry it would not pay to keep large amounts of clothing in stock. In any case he would be able to make a nice suit for me which would not cost much more than one pound.

It did not take long for the owner to find out that I was not an everyday customer. The Indians who followed us quickly told the Indian servants in the store that I was a Boer. When the merchant heard this he

HOW I ESCAPED

produced a chair and asked me to sit. He assured me that it was a great honor for him to meet a Boer. He ordered lemonade to be fetched and served some to me. The drink was very much welcomed because I just could not get rid of my thirst.

He wanted to talk some more but I was too tired to listen. I told him that if he could refer me to a good hotel he could come and talk with me later on. He referred me to the Hotel "Paris et Londres". Since I still could not get the suit from him immediately I ordered the Indian to take me to the hotel.

When I arrived there the hotel owner met me on the porch. He was very surprised to see me in my half washed state. He was a Hindu and unfortunately he also did not understand English.

However one of the servants could understand a little English. I had to explain to him that I wanted a room and added that I was a Boer because the word had acquired a kind of a magical power.

Therefore an order was given that not only was a room to be given to me but also everything that I would need.

It goes without saying that when I arrived in the room my first task was to rest well. I had not slept a wink the whole night and I had traveled a great distance under very difficult circumstances. It therefore did not take long and I was fast asleep. When I awoke I felt completely refreshed and the thought that I was now free made me cheerful. The feeling encouraged me to continue because even though I was outside the reach of the British, I could not stay there. It would not benefit me at all. I had to go further and as soon as possible although I was convinced that there were still many difficulties ahead.

It was imperative to find other clothing. I therefore had the shop owner summoned and using the English-speaking servant I made him understand that he had to fetch me some ready-made garments or else had to make some clothes for me. The next morning I received two suits and some underwear.

To clarify further I must add that on the evening of my arrival the owner of the hotel told me that a Frenchman who was lodging in the same hotel wanted to talk to me. Since I had no decent clothes I requested him to postpone his visit or to visit me in my room.

The Frenchman came to my room where we then had an interesting discussion about the war. He told me the latest news of which we had obviously known nothing in the camp and I imparted to him how I had escaped.

We departed as good friends. He also assured me that in every respect and as far as it was in his power, that he would be at my service. The next morning he had already sent me some clothing as a token of friendship. The clothes were a bit short and small but otherwise they served me well.

After I had had another hot bath to remove the black as far as possible from my body, I put on new clothes. I was forced to put on my old shoes from which I had cut off the front tips because of the pain I had endured in my toes.

Early the next morning I took to the streets and bought myself a white helmet. I inspected the small city Pondicherry very carefully and I do not think that it would be immodest of me to impart some information about it in the next chapter.

8 PONDICHERRY

Pondicherry is not very different from other towns in India. The population consists of nothing but coolies⁴ or Hindus, with the exception of the chief officials and a few merchants of French descent.

This French territory sits on the east coast of India and is a very narrow region of which Pondicherry is the capitol. A garrison of about five hundred native soldiers with French officers has been established there.

Besides Pondicherry there is another small town Villanur situated about three miles from the coast. The French border area is very irregular and one can sometimes find oneself on British territory unexpectedly.

In the days of Governor Dupleix it was a beautiful city but later it became rather dilapidated. There are admittedly a few beautiful buildings like the "Hotel de Ville" and the government buildings but otherwise the buildings you see everywhere are in a semi-derelict state. Even the private houses, all built in Indian style, have a neglected look.

⁴ Note that the word Coolie is used to denote the social class or status of an individual as Hindu is used immediately afterward. The term was used with reference to the poor labor class in Indian society at that time.

There is also a botanical garden which is in a dilapidated condition. Next to the garden is the Dupleix statue and a bandstand.

On Sunday and Thursday afternoons music is played by a military music corps in the presence of large crowds of people.

Not far from Dupleix square is the Esplanade where you can take pleasant walks along the sea. Despite this most people make use of the pier opposite the Dupleix Square and it stretches into the sea for about 200 yards. The air is fresher there than on the Esplanade and the public gather there in large numbers every evening to get a breath of fresh air.

Otherwise the pier is used to get passengers to the large steamships that lie at anchor a considerable distance from land. Furthermore the pier is used to unload perishable goods.

The main export of Pondicherry is peanuts of which thousands of bags are sent to Marseilles every year. The finest oil, which is used for soap, is pressed from the peanuts. The other products are cotton, oil, salt, etc. The salt mine is owned by an English company which pay a small annual interest to the French.

Furthermore there is a fully equipped hospital, good schools, a large library, a beautiful Catholic church and an orphanage for children between ten and sixteen years where Brussels lace is even fabricated.

The second day after my arrival in Pondicherry I received a message from the Governor to visit him. I was obliged to go in my usual suit and shoes because otherwise I would have had to postpone my visit for a long time. I went to the government building and was immediately admitted to his high honorable.

When I entered the room the Governor jumped up to meet me. He grabbed me by the hand and before I could even apologize about my clothing, he shook my hand and congratulated me on my successful escape. He could not understand English very well but we got along fine. He was very surprised that with such an authentic French surname that I could not speak the French language.

HOW I ESCAPED

We chatted pleasantly and when I told him that I would have liked to have returned to South Africa by way of Holland, he gave me very good advice in connection with the execution of my plans.

A few steamships left directly from Pondicherry and proceeded directly to Marseilles, but he warned me not to go via Colombo in Ceylon or any other English port under any circumstances. I would be caught in the English port or caught while stepping over from one ship to another.

If a threat did not exist in Colombo however I would go over to a ship which was sailing between China and Marseille. But rather, in the opinion of the high honorable governor, I had to travel with some or other European ship that arrived at Pondicherry every now and again, and did not have a port stay-over in Colombo. I therefore had to bide my time and make my stay in Pondicherry as pleasant as possible.

Not only the Governor but the other people I met all treated me very kindly. I was invited to dinners often and to a dance party in the Hotel de Ville. I obviously did not have decent clothes and my friend the Frenchman was kind enough to give me white evening dress for the occasion.

In this way I made many friends. Everyone wanted to meet and converse with the Boer escapee. One afternoon shortly after lunch two ladies even came to visit me at the hotel. They presented themselves to me, congratulated me on my successful escape and expressed the hope that I would soon succeed in returning to my homeland. They gave me a few excerpts from the newspapers concerning my escape, which now follow.

Madras Mail, 12 March 1902.

THE ESCAPE OF A BOER OFFICER OUT OF THE
TRICHINOPOLY CAMP⁵

The Commandant of the Boer Camp at Trichinopoly reports that a Boer officer, named J. L. de Villiers escaped the previous night. The following is a description of the fugitive: Age 38, height 5 ft. 8 in., dark in colour, black curly hair, a long oval face, a big nose, a sharp chin, a pointed beard and mustache which he probably shaved off. He has a slender physique. He speaks English with a French accent, dress is unknown, possible destination Pondicherry, where he knows a man named De Closset. De Villiers might succeed in evading the police for a time, but we doubt whether he will ever reach French territory.

It is almost needless to mention here that by chance I once saw the gentleman De Closset's name in a newspaper in the camp and that I corresponded with him, but that he had given me no assistance and before I met him in Pondicherry, he had not even know that I had escaped.

SECOND EXCERPT

Madras Mail, 17 March 1902.

THE ESCAPED BOER OFFICER DE VILLIERS

We announced on Saturday that the Boer officer De Villiers, who escaped from the Trichinopoly camp, managed to reach Pondicherry last Wednesday.

We now understand that he rubbed his face black and went through as a coolie. It seems that he traveled by train from Trichinopoly to Villupuram, and from there

5

Please take note, this news item was translated from English into Dutch in 1903, then into Afrikaans in 1933 and back into English in 2013. The wording of the original Newspaper article will differ. The original meaning will hopefully remain intact.

HOW I ESCAPED

walked to Pondicherry unhindered. It was probably not a difficult task, because the distance to the French border is only twenty miles.

The fugitive is known as a cunning fellow and Boer through-and-through. He is Afrikaner born, an engineer by profession and he is reportedly rich. He cannot speak French but speaks English fluently with an accent.

There is no doubt that his main goal is to return to South Africa to rejoin the Boer commando's in the field. He asked the French authorities to send him to Holland.

He is perfectly safe as long as he stays on French territory seeing as a prisoner of war cannot be extradited. But once he leaves Pondicherry an interesting question arises. He could travel with one of the French ships that depart every month from Pondicherry, but what will happen at the port of Colombo? He will undoubtedly be on British soil as soon as the ship arrives there and the question becomes whether the authorities in Colombo have the right to search the French ship in the port and can arrest him if he is on board.

It is certain that such a step would be justifiable; but whether it is worth the international hostility is a different matter. To the best of our knowledge, De Villiers realizes the legality of his arrest under these circumstances. He has the present intention to stay in Pondicherry until he can depart on a foreign ship that bypasses Colombo.

The case is of little importance anyway and it does not matter much to the British. We believe that most people with a sporting sense would say: "Let the fellow go!"

Similar reports appeared in the "Advocate of England" of 18 March 1902.

It was very interesting to me to read these newspaper reports even if it was only to see what the authorities had discovered in the camp. The last sentence in the second excerpt from the "Madras Mail" was particularly entertaining. My escape was obviously of no interest to the authorities because the bird had flown the coup; but oh what trouble they would subsequently go to, to get me back into their clutches! But more about this later.

The ladies who had visited me warned me to especially be on my guard. They gave me a detailed description of how the border meandered in and out, so it meant that I could find myself on British soil before I was even aware of it. The nearest point on the territorial boundary line was about two miles away from Pondicherry.

They also told me that rumors were circulating that the workers in an English cotton factory planned to kidnap me one night and that they would then deliver me across the border. I was very grateful for the timely warning. One of the two ladies I would later meet again on several occasions and she would provide me with many courtesies.

Other people also warned me that there were strange Indians inside and outside of the hotel and that they were undoubtedly spies who wanted to find out everything about my movements. So I was very careful not only in my actions but also in my choice of friends. I was even very in my conversations with my friend the Frenchman, especially because he was a journalist.

On a certain day the Frenchman invited me to go along with him to the home of a wealthy Hindu to attend a religious gathering. We were the only two Europeans present there that night.

All the other attendees belonged to the wealthy sometimes kingly affluent Hindu class, with fancy clothes, diamond earrings and even diamonds in their hair. Since they only spoke French I unfortunately could understand nothing of the proceedings.

When I entered I was introduced to the host of the gathering and also to the others. They seemed very pleased to meet a Boer. They offered me a place of honor alongside the Frenchman at the head of the table next to the host.

My friend the Frenchman gave a short speech of which I understood nothing. Then two Indians, each with a bouquet of flowers in hand entered the room walking behind each other and handed each of us a bouquet. Shortly thereafter two servants came in with garlands of flowers of which we received two each.

HOW I ESCAPED

That was still not enough. Another maid came in with a tray of champagne while two servants stood behind us with great fans to keep us cool. Finally two of the servants came back with a silver container with lavender or another fragrant perfume which they to my surprise, anointed us with. The proceeding all transpired in a very solemn manner while the eyes of all those present were upon us.

After the ceremony I thanked our host, who fortunately understood a little English, for the hospitable and friendly reception we had received. Our transport, the usual pushcarts, returned us to the hotel that night.

A few days later one of my friends was kind enough to show me the "Madras Mail" of May 7. In it I found the following, the last part was particularly entertaining.

According to the correspondence of a contemporary, De Villiers, the Boer officer who recently escaped from the Trichinopoly camp to Pondicherry is enjoying a very pleasant stay on French territory.

We learned that he was present at a Hindu religious gathering at the home of a wealthy local during the Sree Rama Navami festivals at the beginning of this month.

As we know, the Boers have a penchant for religious gatherings and we can understand that De Villiers would find a Hindu religious gathering very enticing.

After I had been in Pondicherry for about a month and had looked in vain for a foreign ship that would not stop over in Colombo and would take me to Marseilles, the money that I had brought with me from the camp ran out.

Since I still had a balance at the bank in Madras, I sent the manager a cheque with the request to send the amount to me in Pondicherry. As I expected the manager replied that he could not pay out the cheque unless the commandant of the camp in Trichinopoly co-signed. Since I could never dare to ask the commandant for something like that, I was compelled to make a plan to get money.

I fortunately still had the debenture that I had received in the camp from South Africa. A certain Frenchman gave me an advance on it of one hundred rupees, approximately six pounds and ten shillings.

I sent the debenture to a bank in London for payout and as soon as the amount of the debenture was received, he would pay the balance out to me.

Later a wealthy Hindu also offered to help me with money but I did not need it. If I would have had need of it I would have gone to him and given him a promissory note for the money. But he would not hear any of it. My word was good enough for him.

I mention these relatively small trifles to show what high regard the people had for the Boers and how they showed tokens of sympathy in all sorts of ways.

CHAPTER 9 IN THE HOSPITAL

Now I became very bored in Pondicherry. In some ways I was a prisoner just as I had been in the camp because I knew that there were spies everywhere. I had already written to the captain of the French steamer "Dupleix" to ask him if he would not take me with him and whether he would not safely transfer me to another ship headed for Marseille in the port of Colombo. He answered back that he did not advise such a plan because thus far each ship from Pondicherry was immediately surrounded by boats upon arrival by English police to find out whether I was on board. So there was no question that I would not be able to escape this way.

On the twelfth day of the month two Frenchman with whom I had become acquainted would be leaving on the "Dupleix" for Marseille. I made a plan with them that I would hide in a basket and that they would take me as luggage. I carefully explained the plan to them and explained to them how it could be accomplished. Initially they were well pleased with the plan.

In my room I lay on the floor and made myself as small as possible. The dimensions of my body as I marked it off on the ground was as follows: Thirty-eight by twenty-one by ten inches. In short my plan boiled down to the following.

I would hide myself in a basket without anybody knowing, and my French friends would carry the basket on board themselves. My weight was only one-hundred and forty-five pounds. So the weight of the basket

would not be too heavy for them.

Like the others I would buy my ticket for the ship ahead of time.

I knew the agent of the company well and I knew he would not let it slip in what way I was going to depart or would let my name show up on the passenger list.

The ships usually anchored a mile from the shore so that the passengers had to be ferried on board with small boats. As soon as my friends had brought me on board in the basket they would hide me in the cabin as long as the ship remained in the harbor. Once at sea and if my friends were certain that there were no spies on board, I would be liberated and I would be shown to my cabin after showing the room attendant my ticket. By agreement the two Frenchman and I would take as little notice of each other as possible.

When we arrived in Colombo, even before the anchor was lowered or someone was allowed on board I would hide myself in the basket again. When the two Frenchman walked across from one ship to the other, they would carry the basket across the gangway themselves and get me to the other ship safely. Thus the authorities would not have the opportunity to get their hands on me.

With this understanding I had the basket made but when I looked them up a few days before the time to make sure that my plan would be carried out it seemed apparent that they were unwilling. They had thought about my plan again but because of the danger involved they had decided not to proceed. They strongly advised me to stay in Pondicherry.

This turn of events was a great disappointment to me. They departed on May the 15th and I went to see them off on board the ship. When we departed from the pier in a small boat, I waved to all the acquaintances I knew as if I was also leaving. I returned with the same boat however and that evening I learned that the people really thought that I was gone and they had sent telegraphs everywhere that I was on my way to Colombo. The authorities in Colombo would be searching for me for a long time!

It was good luck that my plan with the basket fell through because that

HOW I ESCAPED

same evening I had a severe fever attack. While I was sitting on the pier speaking with acquaintances late that evening I suddenly got a severe pain in my back accompanied with a high fever. During the following days I was really sick but because I stayed in the hotel I could not get a doctor to visit me. Although I waited every morning for improvement the illness became worse. So I decided to have a doctor called in. The doctor, a Hindu, examined me and gave me medicine but I did not receive much benefit from it.

At the same time I had learned that a Norwegian ship would soon arrive to take in cargo for Marseille. Since there was no improvement in my condition I was afraid that I would not be able to see the captain upon his arrival in port and to ask him to take me with.

After I had been lying in the hotel for six days and had not become any better, my friend the Frenchman advised me to go to the hospital. Initially I did not want to do it because I was afraid that I would not get a chance to meet the captain on his arrival and I wanted to hear what advice he could give me. However it seemed that my condition was worse than I had imagined. My friend spoke with the hospital doctor himself and reserved a spot for me. I therefore finally agreed to go.

Upon our arrival in the hospital we visited the doctor. He told me that there were two vacant rooms: The one was for a single person but it was next to a room where a woman lay dying; in the other room two people could occupy it and an English captain already lay there with a disease of the leg. He advised me to take the larger room if I would not mind sharing it with the captain.

I agreed. When I entered the room there was someone sitting next to the captain's bed. I heard him say that it was a Boer that had just entered the room. I did not take any notice of him however but undressed and lay down.

When we were alone shortly afterward the captain turned to me and started talking to me. He told me that he was pleased to meet a Boer and asked me all about the war. I told him how I had escaped to which he replied that he was happy to hear this because he sympathized with the Boers.

Since I was under the impression that I was dealing with an English captain I was very surprised to hear such a suggestion and expressed my doubts. I also added that I found it very unfortunate that he was an English captain because I wanted to ask him to take me with him to Marseille. In turn he was also surprised and told me that although he could speak English he was not an Englishman but a Norwegian. He was the captain of the Norwegian ship that would arrive in Pondicherry within the following few days and would take cargo to Marseille.

This was the same ship that I had heard about and this was the very captain that I wanted to see. Because of my illness I had despaired that I would not meet him on his arrival and now he lay here with me in the infirmary. I regarded the confluence of events as unmistakable providence. I told the captain everything and asked him whether he would take me to Marseille. I had already stayed in Pondicherry for six weeks and I was very anxious to make my getaway.

However it was not necessary to plead for very long because the captain was immediately willing to comply with my request.

“With pleasure,” he replied. “There is one condition, and that is that you should be registered as one of the sailors”. He explained to me that it was a cargo ship and it was not meant to take passengers on board. If he had passengers on board he would have to pay a higher tax in the Suez Canal and from that moment onwards his ship would always be regarded as a passenger ship.

I had no objection to this proposal especially since the captain gave me the assurance that it would not be necessary for me to do labor. He also warned me that I would not find life on a cargo ship as pleasant and convenient. The food would not be tasty and the cabins were near the boilers because the best places which were far from the boilers, were reserved for the cargo. All these objections could not measure up to my earnest desire to escape from Pondicherry.

In this way during the ten days in hospital we became the best of friends.

HOW I ESCAPED

The captain also told me how it had happened that he had arrived so long before his ship did. The malady to his leg had already lasted a for long time and had gotten worse. When he arrived in Ceylon he traveled from Cuddalore to Pondicherry by train. Since he understood that there were competent doctors in Pondicherry he decided to wait for his ship and to come to the hospital in the meanwhile.

After the ship had unloaded a portion of its cargo in Cuddalore, the ship arrived in Pondicherry on the 26th of May and we departed on the 30th of May.

CHAPTER 10

ON BOARD – FAREWELL TO INDIA

At seven o'clock in the evening on the 30th of May we left the hospital and at eight o'clock we went on board. I had to keep my movements as quiet as possible with the result that no one but a few friends who visited me in the hospital knew of my departure.

Among the friends who I said farewell to that evening was the friendly lady who I mentioned before. She gave me a bottle of fortified port and a box of rusks⁶ to take along.

The lady did a lot for me while I was in the hospital and since I was very weak after my long illness she was willing to make flannel clothes for me. I was very grateful for all her sacrifices on behalf of my interests.

Unfortunately it was not possible for me to notify my friends and acquaintances in the camp at Trichinopoly of my departure. Long ago we had made an agreement that as proof of my safe arrival in Pondicherry I would send a letter to them under an assumed name. I sent such a letter after my escape under the pretext that I was asking for some used stamps for a collection. Not surprisingly I did not receive a reply and according to what I had heard later my letters never reached their destination. However I cherished the hope that my friends in the camp would be kept up to date regarding my escape and my departure from India.

⁶ A rusk is a hard dry biscuit or a twice-baked bread

That evening we departed from the pier in a small boat to the Norwegian steamer that was anchored about a mile from the shore. The sea was reasonably stormy and the waves were so high that we could not come alongside the ship under the gangway very easily.

Unfortunately the captain caught his sick leg between the step and the ship so that he fell back into the small boat half unconscious. I succeeded not without danger to jump onto the step but to get the captain on board they were compelled to hoist the small boat onto the deck.

After they had taken the captain to his cabin and tended to him the signal was given to depart. The anchor is lifted and... Farewell India!

I was still very weak and as a result of the accident the leg of the captain was worse than before. We were obliged to spend the first few days in our cabin. There were no doctors on board but there was a chest with medicine and medical volumes in the Norwegian language which I could not understand. When one of us was worse than usual I asked the captain to consult the medical tomes and to call an attendant to prepare the medicine. In this way the captain doctored me and I nursed him while he lay on a sofa in the dining room.

We had many hardships on the trip. First something went wrong with the machinery so that the ship lay motionless for a few hours and then a fierce storm broke so that we progressed very slowly. The captain said more than once that I was probably the Jonah on board and that he should have rather thrown me overboard. The heat was almost unbearable during the day especially when we lay motionless. Because of all the adversity we had lost almost four days and we were obliged stop over in Aden to take on coal.

CHAPTER 11

ADEN – ALMOST CAUGHT

Seeing as the captain would have liked to avoid the British port of Aden he took on a greater supply of coal in Pondicherry. However as a result of the unexpected delay at sea we had to go to Aden. When we came close to the port the captain deemed it expedient to have me sign a contract according to which I was enlisted on the roll as a waiter. So I had a signed contract as a waiter, second class on the steamer “Gidsvold” at the remuneration of one shilling and four pence per day. The contract was a mere formality but for safety's sake it was a very good precautionary measure.

On June the 19th at 10 o' clock in the morning we arrived in Aden. As the first officer of the ship had not been in the port of Aden before the captain was obliged to go to the bridge himself to bring the ship into port.

With much effort we took the captain to the bridge on crutches. I was his assistant and I had to hand him his binoculars and books in which the various signals were written up.

Shortly after we dropped anchor a boat arrived and the port police came on board who then asked to speak to the captain.

Fortuitously I had been standing near the captain and unintentionally heard everything that the officer had said. When he told the captain that they had expected his ship four days earlier I immediately got suspicions that something was wrong and that my presence on board was already

known. The officer was also surprised that the captain had cast the anchor so far out from the wharf. If he had come nearer to the docks the coals would have been hauled in much more easily. Although the officer insisted that the ship had to come closer the captain would not pay any attention.

When the captain asked him how the war in South Africa was going I heard for the first time that peace had been achieved on May the 31st, the day after our departure from Pondicherry and that the Boers had surrendered unconditionally.

The news was like a bombshell and I almost could not believe it.

The captain then gave an order for the tonnage of coal that he needed and the police departed on another boat that had just arrived.

After we had helped the captain back to the dining salon I sat down for a while. Shortly thereafter a waiter brought him a message that there was someone who wanted to talk to him. I went to my cabin to consider the news I had just heard. I must confess that the unconditional surrender saddened me very much.

As I later learned the person who visited the captain was a detective. After a brief conversation the detective left the salon but soon there was another detective. After he left the captain had me summoned and told me what had happened.

The state of affairs were not too rosy for me. The detective discovered that I was on board and wanted to get his hands on me. The prospect to be locked up in the heat of Aden for who knows how long and perhaps to be sent back to India was not appealing to me. So I desperately begged the captain to not have me taken prisoner. After all I was under his flag and under his protection.

He further told me that the first detective came with a warrant from the Norwegian consul who had the power to issue a warrant for my arrest. Although the captain pointed out to the detective that he did not have the right to come on board, the detective appealed to the authority of the warrant from the consul.

The captain tried to get him to understand that I was in his service and that he could not let me go but the detective insisted that I was an escaped prisoner and that he would give the captain another man in my place. The captain did not want to hear anything of it and pointed out to him that he probably gave the consul a wrong impression by using misleading representations. De Villiers was not an escaped prisoner but a prisoner of war. In any case whether De Villiers was an escaped Boer or not he had hired him to help him because of his afflicted leg and would not let him go.

The detective reminded the captain how they had helped another Norwegian captain to return a renegade sailor, in this case an Englishman, to a Norwegian ship. Now the captain had to also help them by surrendering the prisoner.

The captain was definite and to get rid of the detective and he referred him back to the Norwegian consul with a message that he was well aware that the consul could give him orders in the harbor and could direct him to surrender De Villiers. However he was not going to do so unless the consul would accept sole responsibility for such an action.

The detective left with this message but immediately after, a second detective who knew that the first returned without having achieved anything, went straight to the captain with the warrant. The captain had already become so annoyed that he even refused to see the detective but eventually sent him back with the same message as the first.

In the meantime the sailors were intensely busy loading coal.

The captain tasked the first officer to raise the gangway and to get everything ready to depart immediately as soon as the coal was loaded and the papers had returned from the harbor.

When I learned what was happening I went to my cabin and peered through the portal to see whether another boat was heading from the pier to the ship.

I could not get relief from myself and went on deck. In the distance a

small boat was approaching at full speed. When the small boat got closer I saw that it was the port agent who was bringing the papers. I hurriedly went to the captain and told him that the agent had arrived and asked him not to tarry any longer.

Five minutes later when all the matters were in order and the agent had left the gangway was raised. I anxiously waited while being on the lookout. When the sailors had completed the final preparations for our departure and were busy weighing the anchor, I relaxed again. But to my dismay I suddenly saw a large boat heading straight for us at full speed from Aden. When the boat had come near us I saw that there was a crew of British officers and men on board. I immediately went to the captain in the salon and said to him:

“Captain the British are coming in a large boat to arrest me, but I beg of you captain, do not have me removed from the ship, come what may.”

Understandably I was very excited; but when the captain heard that the British were on their way he immediately ordered the first officer to go to full steam. The ship departed at full steam while the anchor was still dangling in the air just above the waterline.

Meanwhile the English boat had come alongside our ship but as the gangway had already been raised they could not climb on board. In this way we steamed ahead next to each other for quite some distance.

The first officer did not know that the English were there to arrest me and so he started to talk to them. They ordered him to bring the ship to a stop because they wanted to speak with the captain. The officer relayed the request to the captain whereupon the captain scolded him with the following words:

“What are you doing here? Make sure that you get to the bridge immediately and bring the ship to the open seas. And tell the English that I am at full speed now and that I will stop for no one in the world.”

The boat still navigated alongside us for a time but later had to return. They were probably furious because at the last moment I had slipped through their fingers.

When I got to the bridge I asked the officer to get three miles from land as soon as possible because then we would be in neutral waters and thus out of danger. He feared that the English would send one of the warships in Aden after us; but since there was no visible smoke from any ship smokestacks I convinced him that there was no danger to fear from that quarter.

I was very lucky to escape the danger. If the had agent arrived a little later with the papers everything would have gone wrong because the captain would not have been able to leave without his papers. The English would then have come on board and would have taken me with them.

We traveled at full speed for quite some time and we were soon far away from Aden. Therefore I could breathe easily again.

The journey went well. For the first time after my long illness I felt completely healthy again. On the 23rd of June I had the privilege of celebrating my birthday opposite Mount Sinai.

After a few days we arrived at Suez where we had to stop again. All ships traveling up the Suez from India had to be inspected to make sure that they did not carry the Bubo⁷ illness.

Before we arrived in Suez, the captain advised me to follow a different plan than the one I had in Aden. I had the to keep my distance from the captain as far as possible. I had to pretend that I had nothing personally to do with the captain and I needed to concentrate on my job as a waiter second class.

⁷ A bubo (Greek boubôn, “groin”) (plural form: buboes) is the swelling of the lymph nodes. It is found in infections such as bubonic plague, gonorrhea, tuberculosis, chancroid or syphilis. It is similar in appearance to a huge blister and usually appears under the armpit, in the groin or on the neck.

According to historical records, buboes were characteristic of the pandemic responsible for the Black Death and perhaps other ancient pandemics. - Wikipedia

I followed his advice and when we arrived in Suez I was busy washing the few pieces of clothing that I possessed. When the inspection of the crew occurred I was also called. I took my place in a long line behind the other crewmen and like them I was examined by the doctor. After a few hours we went through the Suez Canal and soon arrived in Port Said where we had to take on coal again.

There was not much danger that I would be harassed there by the English because Port Said was more or less neutral ground. Despite this I thought it would be safer not to go ashore although I gladly would have visited the city.

I also could not leave the captain to his own fortunes. Although I was completely healthy, the captain had become worse. After the accident that he had had during our departure from Pondicherry his leg had deteriorated. Unfortunately there was no suitable doctor in Port Said but he had sent a letter with the postal ship to Marseille to ask for a skilled doctor to meet us at the ship upon our arrival.

The following night his leg was very painful. While I was peacefully asleep I heard moaning. I jumped up and went to the cabin of the captain. He had the most terrible pain, so much so that tears were rolling down his cheeks and he was moaning in pain. In my own way I tried to comfort and doctor him with the result that there was a bit of relief.

It grieved me to see the condition that the poor man that was lying there was in. His condition generated compassion in everyone and as for myself, my heart was additionally filled with gratitude towards him. He had always treated me as a true friend and if it was not for his determined attitude in Aden, the English would have undoubtedly gotten me in their clutches.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

On July the 8th at eight o' clock in the morning we arrived in Marseille. It is understandable that I was very glad to be back on dry land again after so many weeks at sea. Shortly after our arrival a doctor came on board to examine the captain. He injected him with cocaine and transport him to a hospital.

Since I did not understand French I was lucky to meet a Hollander in Marseille soon after my arrival. He had heard that there was a Boer on board and came to the ship to welcome me. He was very friendly and invited me to go with him to his home.

I accepted his invitation with delight but I told him that I first wanted to call on a Frenchman from whom I had received a letter. The Hollander knew the Frenchman well but since the man lived outside the city on a summer property, we would not find him at his office. After my farewell to the captain, the Hollander and I went to his home.

It was touching to take leave of my trusted friend and then to leave him behind in unfamiliar hands. I thanked him very much for everything he had done for me. He did not allow me to pay a penny towards the journey or to pay for my stay on board.

Later I would often write to him and later received the news that his leg had become so much worse that it had to be amputated. Thus he had to say goodbye to a career at sea. These tidings put me in a dismal mood.

My new friend hosted a delicious reception dinner such as I had not had for a long time. After all my hardships I enjoyed the dinner immensely.

For six weeks we had the most plain food, mostly canned, so the banquet was very welcome. My friend had done everything in his power to make the day enjoyable for me.

I did not want to stay in Marseille longer than was absolutely necessary and so I left that same evening with the express train to Paris.

I also did not plan to linger in Paris for very long. In Pondicherry I had already written to my family in South Africa about my escape and had told them about my plan to go from India to Holland as soon as possible. My brother and sisters had planned to make a trip for a long time. Thus I wrote to them that if they still wanted to go to Europe that they had to implement the plan immediately. They had to send their response to Amsterdam Poste restante, and they also had to determine where I would meet them in Amsterdam.

For this reason I only stayed in Paris for a day and arrived in Amsterdam on the morning of July the 10th. To my great disappointment no letter was waiting there for me. My letters out of Pondicherry probably never reached their destination.

I really did not know what to do. I did not have a lot of money left and I decided to immediately go to England and to travel from there to South Africa third class. I wanted to return to the land of my birth as soon as possible.

Perchance one day I happened to meet a fellow South African in the streets of Amsterdam. He told me that I could go to South Africa without a letter of permission. Therefore I was obliged to remain in Amsterdam temporarily. Seeing as staying in a hotel under my circumstances would have been too expensive, I went to a cheaper boardinghouse.

On the recommendation of my friends I went to the Boer Committee and received a small assistance from them namely eleven shillings and eight pennies per week. This committee undoubtedly gave many Afrikaners significant support for which they could never have been too grateful.

It was a big disappointment to not get any news from South Africa. When I had been in Amsterdam for quite some time I had the luck to one day meet one of my friends, the gentleman Philip de Villiers, who I had not seen in a long while.

After we greeted each other and answered many mutual questions he asked me whether I had received any news from my brother and two sisters. I had not heard from them in the last four or five months. He could not believe it and told me that they had come to Europe a few months before. He could not give me any more information because he did not know their address. His news was not of too much benefit to me and my disappointment was greater than before.

Now that I had certainty that they were in Europe I immediately wrote to the Bank in London and wrote to the Union Castle Line in the expectation that I would obtain the address from one or the other.

The next day I met the gentleman Philip de Villiers again with four more Afrikaners on Rembrandt square. They had already gone looking for me at my boardinghouse and when I saw them I immediately became aware that there was something afoot. They first insisted that we had to go to a cafe and that I had to treat them because they had good news for me. On the way Philip de Villiers showed me a letter which I immediately recognized as one of my brothers.

He had received the letter the same morning with a separate letter for me in it. The letter also contained the address of my brother. It is needless to say that I was ecstatic to receive the news.

We went to a well-known cafe where we read the letters. My brother had cabled Pondicherry twice and had gone to Paris twice to find out what had happened to me.

They had also traveled in America and after their return they had gone to great expense to track me down and all that time I had been wandering around Amsterdam despondently. Now all my troubles were at an end. Before I took leave of my friends, we drank to each others health several times and wished each other a speedy return to South Africa.

I sent a telegram to my brother straight away and received a reply the next day that they would be looking for me in Amsterdam. Four days later I received a telegram to meet them at the central station. I received the telegram too late to meet them on time at the station. So I walked in the direction of the station and as I was walking along the Rokin⁸, I saw a vehicle with three people inside. Before they had seen me I had recognized them and I hastily joined them.

Here I must bid the patient reader farewell. We still traveled in Europe for a few months, especially in France, Belgium and Italy and after we had sojourned in London for a few days, we returned to South Africa again with the Norman Castle, where we arrived after a safe journey on December the 2nd.

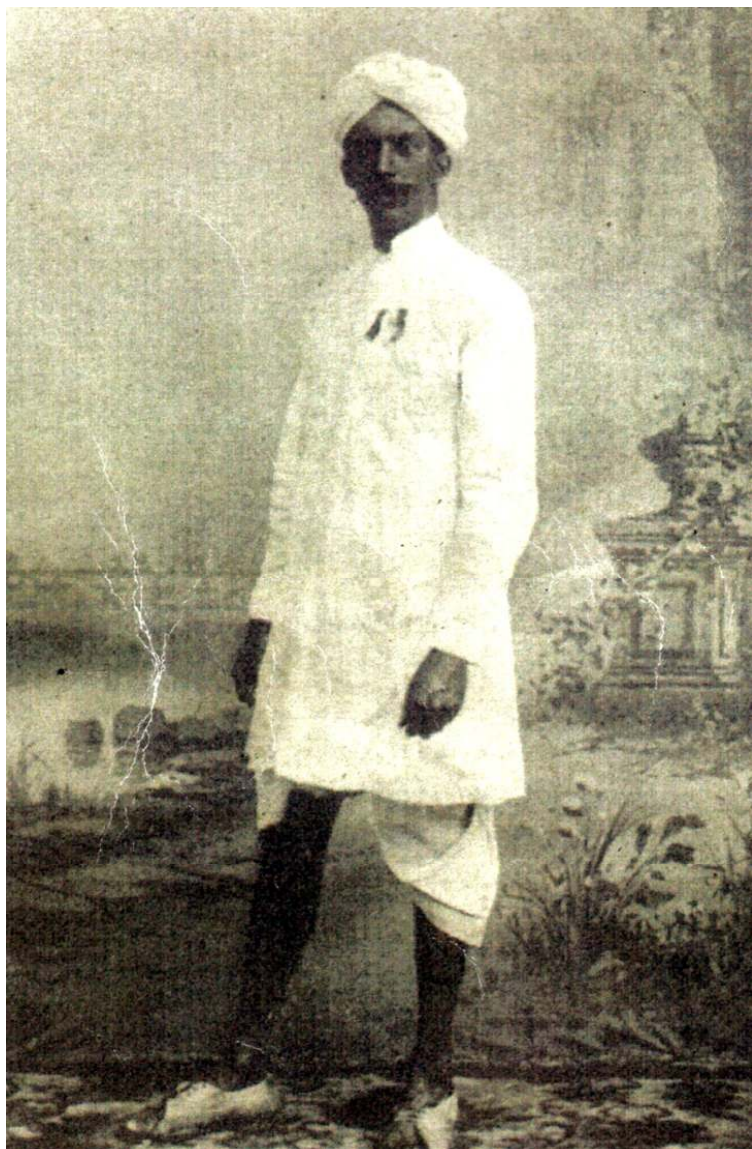
The End

⁸ Rokin is a major street in Amsterdam

A close-up photograph of the author in disguise



The author posing in the disguise he used to escape



CHAPTER 13

J. L. DE VILLIERS AFTER THE WAR

The following paragraphs are the introduction to the 1933 Afrikaans translation of the book. In this 2013 English translation it has been re-ordered to the back of the book as a postscript because it briefly chronicles what happened to the author after the Anglo-Boer war had ended and also imparts some personal background information.

The gentleman J. L. de Villiers, the author of this book was born in 1871 in the Paarl⁹ where he received his first education at the Jongenskool gymnasium. Later he traveled to England to be trained as a civil engineer. After the completion of his studies he accepted a position as engineer in Pretoria.

With the outbreak of the Anglo-Boer war in 1899 he was conscripted by the Transvaal government and joined as an officer in the army. After enduring through the most important part of the war he was captured in 1901 and sent to India. His further experiences are detailed in this story.

After the war he did not return to his previous position in Pretoria but settled in the Paarl. He went into partnership with a local engineering

⁹ Paarl is a town and district in the Western Cape and is the oldest European settlement in South Africa. It is known for its vineyards and wine production.

firm and was jointly responsible for the design of the Northern-Paarl Church, the construction of which was tasked by his firm.

As the result of a chronic cold that he had contracted during the war and with all his tribulations in India which had made it worse, he developed a terminal illness from which he died in 1910 at the age of 39¹⁰ in the Paarl.

The first edition in 1903 which was published in Dutch was quickly sold out. Seeing as the publishers are convinced that the romantic adventures of a hero of the Boer war will always have a certain charm for young people as well as the general public, they have decided to publish a second edition in Afrikaans.

We trust that this interesting snippet from the history of the Boer war will not be lost, but that it will in the words of the author impart as much pleasure to the reader as his escape caused him anguish and distress.

S. P. H. DE VILLIERS

Paarl, 15 May 1933

¹⁰ It should be noted that the newspaper reports eight years earlier had indicated him to be 38 when in fact he was closer to 31 years of age.

CHAPTER 14

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND AND ENGLISH TRANSLATION NOTES

The true life adventure of J. L. de Villiers was born from the circumstances of the Second Anglo-Boer war between 1899 and 1902. The final result was the annexation of the two Boer republics by the British empire. There are some noteworthy facts which can be gleaned from the conflict when looked at from the vantage of the modern historical perspective.

The Boer war can be regarded as the first modern resource war. Although the origins and reasons for the war is more complex than I can endeavor to present here, at its most fundamental the conflict was the result of the discovery of gold in the Witwatersrand area. The prospect of the then dominant world power to obtain access to such new-found mineral wealth and the desire of the Boer republics of the Transvaal and Orange Freestate for self determination and control of this wealth would inevitably lead to conflict.

The war introduced many modern concepts of war together in concert: The use of Gatling machine guns, the introduction of trench warfare, barbed wire, guerrilla tactics as employed by the Boer commando's

against the numerically superior British forces and the use of concentration camps.

Over 28 000 Boer woman and children died in the British concentration camps. The total amount of interred African dead remains unknown. The high death rate was due to the fact that incredibly high numbers of prisoners were interred in relatively small areas. This resulted in logistical problems with insufficient supplies of food, medical supplies and facilities. Sanitary conditions quickly deteriorated with the result that typhoid became rampant. Now due to bad planning and the low priority that the concentration camp woman and children enjoyed when compared to British military objectives, this would result in the exceptionally high mortality rate.

Now compare this to the conditions that de Villiers and his fellow prisoners of war experienced in the Indian camp at Trichinopoly. Their living conditions were quite reasonable when compared to the conditions which the interred women and children endured back in South Africa. This can be explained by the fact that the Trichinopoly camp was not exceptionally overcrowded (de Villiers reported that the camp housed 1000 P.O.W's) and also by the fact de Villiers was captured in 1901 when the outcome of the war was already a foregone conclusion. Also there were individuals such as Emily Hobhouse who had visited the camps in South Africa and was outraged by the conditions that she had found there. An uproar and controversy arose back in England and by 1901 efforts were underway to improve the conditions in the detention camps.

Some notable historical figures emerged from the Boer war and of these I would briefly like to highlight four:

The first is Lord Herbert Kitchener. During his tenure as commander in chief of the British forces in South Africa he pursued a "scorched earth" policy against the Boer population and introduced the concentration camps. This was in response to the Boers who had overwhelmingly switched to gorilla warfare tactics after the capitol Pretoria was captured in June 1900.

After the Boer war had ended with the conclusion of peace on 31 May 1902, Kitchener went on to re-organize the Indian army and ultimately became Britain's secretary of state for war with the outbreak of the first World War in 1914. He served alongside Winston Churchill in the war cabinet until his death in 1916. It is well known that Kitchener predicted a long and protracted conflict at the beginning of the first World War.

BRITONS



JOIN YOUR COUNTRY'S ARMY!
GOD SAVE THE KING

Reproduced by permission of LONDON OFFICE

The iconic 1914 Kitchener Wants You poster

This brings us to Winston Churchill. From the onset of the Boer war Churchill was a war correspondent for the Morning Post. At one point he was captured and imprisoned in the Boer capitol Pretoria. He escaped from his prison, continued as a war correspondent and later even joined as a British soldier. In 1900 he returned to England where he wrote up his exploits and observations and then embarked on his political career. Churchill went on to serve as Lord of the Admiralty during the first World War and as Prime Minister of Britain during the second World War. He is arguable the most well known political leader in British history.

The third notable figure that emerged from the Boer war was South African general J. C. Smuts. Smuts was a general during the Boer war and pursued gorilla tactics vigorously. After the conclusion of peace he embarked on a career in politics and served in the cabinet of the South African union. In 1914 at the outbreak of the great war he formed the South African Defense Force. He was invited to join the British Imperial War cabinet in 1917 and later served on it again during the second World War. He was the only signatory on both the First and Second World War peace treaties.

Smuts was influential in the establishment of the League of Nations which became the precursor to the United Nations. He even wrote the pre-amble to the United Nations charter and also pioneered the philosophy of Holism. Although his contributions might seem illustrious Smuts is a very controversial historical figure because of his views on

racial segregation and the resultant unjust laws which he helped to conceive and implement. This brought him into conflict with the fourth and last individual I would like to mention: Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhi spent 21 years in South Africa where he developed his political views. His personal experiences of racial prejudice prompted him to become politically active. During the Boer war Gandhi volunteered to form a group of ambulance drivers. At the battle of Spioen Kop Gandhi and his bearers had to carry wounded soldiers for many miles to a field hospital because the terrain was too rough for the ambulances. General Buller mentioned the courage of the Indians in his dispatch and as a result Gandhi and 37 other Indians received medals.

After the Boer war ended Gandhi continued to fervently oppose racial discrimination and the resultant laws and so came into direct conflict with J. C. Smuts. Both men were lawyers and philosophers and even though they were on opposite sides, their relationship was one of respect and would even warm in later years. Before Gandhi left South Africa in 1914 to become the most revered Indian statesman, he presented Smuts with a pair of self made sandals. In 1939 Smuts returned the sandals to Gandhi for his 70th birthday with the following message:

“I have worn these sandals for many a summer, even though I may feel that I am not worthy to stand in the shoes of so great a man.”

Now the experiences of these men during the Boer war would help to shape their futures and their politics. The Boer war also helped to shape the thinking in the great conflicts to come. Not only regarding military technology and tactics but even contributed in some way to the impetus for the coming Great War of 1914.

After following the exploits and difficulties experienced by the British in South Africa many Germans came to the conclusion that if a few thousand untrained Boer soldiers could occupy the attention of half a million British soldiers for such a protracted period of time, it made logical sense that the German army would undoubtedly be victorious if a conflict ever erupted between England and Germany. It is said that even Kaiser Wilhelm held this point of view. This idea was to prove to be disastrous as the natures of the two conflicts were essentially very different.

Later during the build-up to the second World War many English criticized the German government for the racial discrimination laws that were systemically introduced during the 1930s against the Jews. The counter argument that was sometimes raised by Germans was that the British government was essentially doing the same thing by allowing the South African Union to implement racial laws against people of non European descent. The very same laws that J.C. Smuts promoted and pursued after the Boer war. Now these laws would stir feelings of injustice in a young man by the name of Nelson Mandela and would prompt a new and well known chapter in South African history.

In conclusion I would submit to you that although the Second Boer War was a relatively small conflict compared to the conflicts that followed, its echoes and reverberations were felt for decades afterward and that it left an indelible impression on those who participated.

I invite you to do some further reading and research on this topic. Today we have a great treasure trove of easily accessible online information. From Wikipedia to YouTube, websites dedicated to the topic and traditional resources such as books. It has never been easier to broaden ones world view.

Personally my hope is that I will have the opportunity to learn more of your own history and your particular culture wherever you reside on this blue dot. After all we are living in the age where we are no longer just citizens of a particular country but we are all citizens of our shared planet.

E. W. DE VILLIERS
PRETORIA
2013

ENGLISH TRANSLATION NOTES

The book “Hoe ek ontsnap het” was originally written in 1903 by J. L. de Villiers. It was translated from the original Dutch into Afrikaans in 1933. The Afrikaans translation was the version used to prepare this English edition. If I can ever obtain or gain access to an original Dutch translation of this book I will certainly endeavor to compare the original with the current English translation for review and correction.

This translation was prepared in two stages. The first stage was a straightforward direct translation. The second stage was to make sure that the correct meaning in each sentence and paragraph was conveyed. Meaning superseded exact translation considerations and being a secondary translation I believe this to be the correct approach.

I would like to mention some of the particular choices that were made in this translation. These are by no means extensive and just serves to illustrate my thinking:

The first is the use of the word “coolie”. J. L. de Villiers uses the word throughout the book although not exclusively. To de Villiers the word was a class distinction referring to the Indian laborer class as opposed to being a primarily racial classification. This can be evidenced by the fact that de Villiers distinguishes between laborers and the more affluent classes: e.g. “The population consists of nothing but coolies or Hindus”. De Villiers also attended events organized and held by affluent Hindu Indians and where he felt honored by their attentions and praise. So in my opinion he was not racist but was using the colloquial term used at the time.

So the question becomes why did I decide to use the word sparingly as I replaced it with the word Indian almost exclusively. As a matter of fact I only left the word in if it was used in direct speech or to illustrate class distinction. There are two primary reasons for this choice:

1. Given the modern history of South Africa I thought that it would be prudent to give this matter important consideration. The fact is a South African translator has to consider this as a factor when

translating a European Africans work. Now some would argue that I am being politically correct to the point of nausea but then again if one was accurate to the point of insensitivity, it would also be the wrong approach.

2. I thought that that it would be a distraction and impede the flow and narrative of the story. De Villiers sentiments and thinking only becomes clear in the latter part of the story, so my intention was not to distract the reader with the idea that the main protagonist was in fact being derogatory towards other races early on in the narrative.

The second and final example is the choice of the use of the words British and English. De Villiers made no distinction between the two and used the word English exclusively. Here I also used creative license: For example when referring to warships I used the term British warship instead of English warship as used by the author. I found that the use of British instead of English in this particular instance had more impact as it gives the implication that the Empire was pursuing de Villiers. Now in the context of the story it actually makes sense because denying de Villiers his victory would be a part of enforcing the idea that the unconditional surrender was undoubtedly a total surrender to the might of the British Empire.

Even with the above mentioned examples I still used creative license as sparingly as possible because the translation has to be in line with the authors original intent: The telling of a truthful adventure. And to this I have tried to remain faithful as well as to introduce this small part of history to a wider audience.

E. W. DE VILLIERS

Pretoria

2013

